

Personal Submission

Inquiry into Alcohol and Other Drugs

Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sports

Name

James Brett

To Whom it May Concern,

Thank you for allowing me to contribute to this inquiry.

INTRO

I'm James and in 'forever recovery' from Alcohol Use Disorder. I've just celebrated 14 years of sobriety and proud daily of this. I'm 43 years young.

I have an optimistic view on life and of people in general. I believe if we are given the opportunity, we will generally make good decisions. Good decisions and setting a good example are contagious. I believe most of us act with best intentions.

For context, I was a high functioning alcohol addict and maintained a successful career during and after my problems. I am well-regarded within community, industry and friends, and am involved constructively in most things where afforded the opportunity and where I have capacity.

One huge problem is the culture of drinking in Australia (I focus on drinking here, noting many other serious AOD issues).

I caused harm to the community and people in many ways during my years of alcohol abuse. This includes: unnecessary medical needs, serious motor vehicle crash and minor injuries, court appearances, costs and administrative issues, as well as stress and concern to many of my friends and family members. (please request detail if relevant).

I believe all decisions and actions as humans are either constructive or destructive. I believe we should be working toward constructive resolution, however slow-moving, but the right decisions can be made by the right people. And now is the time to grow momentum toward being more constructive around Alcohol. New generations are improving at this.

WHAT COULD HAVE PREVENTED MY EXPERIENCE?

If I had observed different modelled behaviour, as a child and teenager, it may have been helpful. My parents are absolutely amazing. They did not drink heavily nor have alcohol problems. However at the same time I was not taught much about alcohol generally.

If I had chosen different friends and colleagues in High School and University, this would probably have helped – different networks and peer pressures.

If there was better Education in schools and workplaces about healthy/ier options and prioritisations. We are moving toward this, but it's far from good enough.

If it's not clear enough, alcohol is classified as a group 1 carcinogen, like tobacco. But nobody really knows this unless they are told. So tell it. It should be common knowledge.

PROBLEMS FROM MY POINT OF VIEW

Workplaces – from the very beginning of my work journey, alcohol was part of lunch, afternoons, evenings, parties, celebrations, birthdays, events, hosting clients, gifts to clients, gifts from clients.. basically everything. This must stop. It is top-down. When we look at leaders in our industry (banking), we see many overweight, eating, drinking, smooth talking egotistical people (mostly men). We should look to leaders who look healthy, eat healthy, talk healthy, and provide positive modelled behaviour. One of my bosses asked me once to drive their car whilst under the influence of alcohol. What if I said no?

Intergenerational – Australia is a country built on immigration, many introduced Australians experienced a tough time establishing themselves and may have even introduced alcohol as part of their culture for coping. Many original peoples of Australia were introduced and have experienced harms from the introduction of alcohol to Australia.

Schools – I believe a baseline level of alcohol awareness is important. When I was in High School there was education around drugs (ecstasy – circa Anna Wood late 90's), but there was zero, *absolutely nothing*, about safe use of alcohol. And I was very fortunate to attend a private all boys school where this was a very important gap in hindsight.

In 20 years from 2000-2018, 392 Australians died from MDMA (ecstasy). This is too many. However, each and every year there are 10 times as many Australians who die from alcohol-related causes. This is unacceptable.

Access – Ease and speed of access to alcohol is a huge problem. Dan Murphys, First Choice, Liquorland, have full massive warehouses, competing with each other for market share of the huge \$17Bill + on offer that consumers spend each year on poison.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

Mental Health Services are part of this in my experience. Some people who overuse alcohol suffer from mental health issues, and alcohol can be used to support coping. Chicken and egg. "I'm drinking because I'm depressed, and I'm depressed because I'm drinking" – this was part of my experience.

There is plenty of access to Mental Health, this is true – we're in Australia. But it's costly. What is the answer here? Should we spend money today upstream, or, in the future downstream? What are the costs of fast access? Of Face to face access? Phone access? Of follow up, accountability and ongoing care? One or two conversations might be great, but often changing habits requires medium term solution and programs.

Real-life storytelling and people with first-hand experience and knowledge should be part of the solution. Advocates with a mission. Volunteers where possible, but also need paid support (because minimum income is important, especially if replacing other work). People who are confident and vulnerable enough to speak up about experience. People who can influence. Famous people. Leaders. Those who can be looked up to.

Mainstream Media – needs to be a part of supporting change. They will need to bravely forgo alcohol advertisement revenue. What about ads for gyms, for sports, for community organisations, for healthier lifestyles and activities that don't relate to alcohol?

Socialisation – I have no idea about how to solve this, as I'm not a hugely social person. But what are the alternatives to going to the pub/club? Provide access to this. Research this. Create these things for people. Promote them. Arts and entertainment. Dancing, singing,

sports, recreation, education, what are the many alternatives and how can we make them better / cheaper / easier to access / inclusive?

Do people realise how hard it is to get a non-alcoholic drink at a function? So many functions I attend every year, I see endless trays of champagne and beer. Maybe a random cola. But no water. I have to either ask, and wait forever like it's a problem, or go hunting for water.

Also do you know how much a pub or club charges for soda water from post-mix? \$4-\$5 is common. On rare occasions I applaud venues that provide non-alcoholic beverages for free (rare). Especially just water. I am unsure but I reckon people make a decision "well .. since it costs \$5 for a glass of basically free water, I might as well spend \$8 for a beer, right?"

WHAT MADE ME CHANGE?

I changed for many reasons, one of them being having children and my rationality around being the best role model for them I could be. Another reason was being an ultimatum from my now wife. Another reason was constant shame and self-disappointment and wanting to enjoy a better life than one of constant fog and regret.

I attempted support via AA, but was not suited to this.

I was fortunate to be able to access psychiatric care and admission to a private rehabilitation clinic. I attended both as an inpatient and outpatient for years following – obtaining amazing support and care. The care included relationship counselling. This is important – because partners and carers are critical team members for success. They need to be heard too, as they are most heavily impacted from destruction.

THANK YOU

I now look forward to the rest of my life – building and growing. I am delighted to support any questions regarding this topic and aim to support the community and a safer and healthier Australia with as much energy, capacity and capability as I can.

With warm regards and compassion,

James Brett